

AFTINET Bulletin No. 29, October 10, 2001

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Contents

1. Doha Meeting may be postponed
2. Developing country governments criticise WTO draft Ministerial Declaration and Australian position paper on a new round
3. Ambiguous messages from Australian WTO Paper on Education Services: need to keep campaigning
4. Sydney Fair Trade Rally Tuesday November 13, 12 noon Darling Harbour Convention Centre, Seminar and Band Night Sunday November 11
5. PNG, the IMF and Globalisation Sydney Seminar , October 15 and 16

1. Doha Meeting may be postponed

Despite WTO chief Mike Moore insisting that the Ministerial Meeting in Doha will go ahead on November 9 to 13, other reports suggest that the meeting may be postponed until next year, with possibly a brief meeting held in Geneva in November. The reasons appear to be a combination of security concerns and the fact that key developing countries have heavily criticised the draft Ministerial Declaration produced by the WTO secretariat on September 26. Commentators are doubtful that agreement about a draft will be reached before the proposed dates of the November meeting.

2. Developing country governments criticise WTO draft Ministerial Declaration and Australian position papers on a new round and education services

The draft declaration has two parts. The first part is the main draft declaration, which contains the issues and programme for the future work of the WTO. The second part deals with implementation of existing WTO agreements which have been the main focus and concern of developing countries.

The document is available at <http://www.ictsd.org/ministerial/doha/relevantdoc.htm>

The document is a first draft and lacks detail. However it ignores most of the concerns about implementation of existing WTO agreements expressed by developing country governments over the last two years. It includes proposals for negotiations on the new issues of investment, competition policy and government procurement, despite clear opposition to such new agreements from developing countries.

Here are some comments:

The Indian Ambassador expressed :

“profound disappointment and dismay over the fact that even at this late stage our major trading partners are unwilling to show the required degree of political will and flexibility...

Despite our best endeavour to try and be positive towards the draft that has been circulated, we are finding ourselves unable to do so...Core concerns in certain of the implementation proposals have not been effectively addressed”

The Tanzanian Ambassador commented on behalf of the 40 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the WTO:

“Yesterday we expressed our disappointment on the Draft on Implementation. I am afraid I can say the same thing with regard to this Draft Declaration since in our view it has not adequately taken into account the interests and views of LDCs as expressed by the LDC Ministers in Zanzibar.

The LDCs have been calling for the recognition of the imbalances and problems generated by the present WTO system and rules and the need for their correction. However these problems are not adequately reflected in the Declaration, including the preamble. Nor are adequate remedies put forward in the document.

The LDC Ministers also expressed in Zanzibar that they are not prepared for negotiations on the Singapore and other new issues, and that they are also unable to participate in negotiations on a broad agenda nor implement new obligations due to the LDCs' limited capacity. Yet the draft declaration is proposing a broad-based negotiating agenda that includes many new issues that imply a heavy burden of new obligations for LDCs and other developing countries.”

Both went on to propose extensive amendments to the drafts.

Australian paper on a new round

The Australian position paper on a new round released on October 5 restates the government's previous position. It supports a new negotiating round, while conceding that the launch of such a round is in doubt. It calls for further liberalisation of trade in goods, services and agriculture. While not taking the initiative on investment and competition policy, the paper indicates that the government is prepared to agree to limited negotiations in these areas in return for concession on goods, services and agriculture.

The paper claims that the flexibility of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) enables Australia to make its own policy decisions on cultural policy and public services like health and education. However, this does take into account proposed changes to the GATS which may arise in the negotiations (see paper on services below).

The paper is available on the DFAT website www.dfat.gov.au

3. Ambiguous messages from Australian WTO Paper on Education Services: need to keep campaigning

The government also tabled its first paper on education services at the ongoing WTO negotiations on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in Geneva. Up until now, Australia has not listed public education for inclusion in the GATS agreement, but it has listed private secondary and tertiary education services.

However, these commitments must be seen in the context of the ambiguity in the GATS of the definition of public services, and the possible changes to GATS in the future which could open up public funding of public services to private firms, both national and international. AFTINET has been campaigning strongly against such changes, and has been pressing for the government to support the unambiguous exclusion of all public services from the GATS.

The paper sends ambiguous messages. It begins by stating that governments “must retain their sovereign right to determine their own domestic funding and regulatory policies/measures” for education. This reflects the lobbying done by community groups through AFTINET and other organisations

However the paper then goes on to note that few countries have listed education services to be included in the GATS and argues that further liberalisation of education services would allow students a wider range of educational options.

The paper argues for the removal of existing barriers to trade in education services, including limits on ownership/foreign equity, rules on twinning arrangements for institutions and lack of transparency in government regulatory, policy and funding frameworks. It also argues for the removal of visa restrictions for students. This is somewhat ironic given the recent changes to Australian visa requirements which have tightened restrictions for international students.

The paper concludes by urging other countries to make similar commitments on education services to those already made by Australia. It does not argue explicitly for the exclusion of public services from the negotiations.

The paper should be posted on the DFAT website soon at www.dfat.gov.au/trade/negotiations/services/index.html#ausgats

If it is not there, a hard copy can be obtained by telephoning DFAT 02 6261 3156.

These negotiations will continue over the next year, so it is vital that we keep pressing the government on the exclusion of public services from the GATS. If you have not already done so, please send a letter to the Minister. A draft letter and other campaign materials are at www.aftinet.org.au

4. Sydney Fair Trade Rally 12 noon Darling Harbour Convention Centre Tuesday November 13, Seminar and Band Night Sunday November 11

Rallies and events for fair trade will be held around the world between November 9 and 13 whether the meeting proceeds in Doha or Geneva.

The Sydney events are:

Seminar : Globalisation from below? Alternatives to Corporate Globalisation

Sunday November 11, 11.30-3.30 pm

Tom Mann Theatre, 136 Chalmers St, Surry Hills

Featuring International and Australian speakers.

Band Night Sunday 11 November 7.30pm

Metro Theatre, George St. Sydney

Featuring: The Tenants, Matt Ellis and Raw Sugar. With special appearances by host Tug Dumbly and Frank Bennett.

Fair Trade Rally

Tuesday November 13, 12 Noon

Assemble at the Convention Centre, Darling Harbour, march to Martin Place.

5. PNG, the IMF and Globalisation Sydney Seminar , October 15 and 16

The Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union (NSW Construction and General Division) and PNG Solidarity Action present a screening of a film documentary by John Pilger and speakers from the CFMEU and PNG Solidarity Action, followed by discussion.

1st Screening (Lidcombe)

Monday 15th October 5:30—7pm

CFMEU Office: Level 1, 12 Railway Street, Lidcombe, (1 minute walk from Lidcombe station)

2nd Screening (Sydney City)

Tuesday 16th October 5:30—7pm

CFMEU Office: 18 Commonwealth Street Sydney, (off Liverpool Street, near Hyde Park War Memorial)